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ABSTRACT

Learning from job experiences is essential for every manager's development. Managers learn best from challenging experiences, when employing a variety of learning experiences, and when employing strategies that coordinate what they want to learn with challenges likely to teach these lessons. Becoming a more versatile learner is essential. There are four sets of learning tactics: (1) feeling tactics (learning by acknowledging their feelings and trusting their gut reactions); (2) action tactics (learning by doing); (3) thinking tactics (figuring things out by recalling the past, imagining the future, and/or gathering facts from books and reports); and (4) accessing-others tactics (seeking advice, watching others, and/or taking courses). Readers are advised to consider their preferred and nonpreferred learning tactics, understand the benefits and problems with these tactics, and venture out of their comfort zones by expanding their learning tactics. To become truly versatile, managers should identify what they want to learn, choose appropriately challenging experiences, and map the sequence of learning tactics to meet each challenge. (Contains 11 references.) (MLH)

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IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOK
ED 422 617

FOR THE PRACTICING MANAGER

Becoming a More Versatile Learner

Maxine A. Dalton

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AN IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOK

Becoming a More Versatile Learner

Ideas Into Action Guidebooks

Aimed at managers and executives who are concerned with their own and others' development, each guidebook in this series gives specific advice on how to complete a developmental task or solve a leadership problem.

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AN IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOK

Becoming a More Versatile Learner

Maxine A. Dalton

Center for Creative Leadership

From the Series Editor

"Ideas into action" is a phrase that guided the establishment of the Center for Creative Leadership in 1970, and it has been the touchstone for its work in subsequent years. It expresses very succinctly the principle that if managers and executives are provided with the best thinking on leadership in a straightforward, accessible form, they are much more likely to become effective leaders.

This series of guidebooks is a special embodiment of the phrase. With respect to "ideas," the series draws on the practical knowledge of CCL, generated in the course of thirty years of research and educational activity conducted in partnership with literally hundreds of thousands of managers and executives. Much of this knowledge is shared—in a way that is distinct from the typical university department, professional association, or consultant organization. CCL is not essentially a collection of individual experts, although the individual credentials of its staff are impressive; rather it is a community, with its members holding certain principles in common and working together to understand and generate practical responses to today's leadership and organizational challenges.

With respect to "into action," the purpose of the series is to provide the practicing manager with specific advice on how to complete a developmental task or solve a leadership problem. In other words, these guidebooks will facilitate your ability to act.

The series is thus one of the ways that CCL carries out its mission of advancing the understanding, practice, and development of leadership for the benefit of society worldwide. We think that you will find the Ideas Into Action Guidebooks an important addition to your leadership toolkit.

Russ S. Moxley

Table of Contents

7
Introduction

8
The Four Sets of Learning Tactics
- Feeling Tactics
- Action Tactics
- Thinking Tactics
- Accessing-others Tactics

13
Finding the Baseline
- What Are Your Preferred Learning Tactics?
- Benefits and Problems with Your Preferred Tactics

19
Becoming a More Versatile Learner
- Get Out of Your Comfort Zone
- Expand Your Learning Tactics

23
Conclusion: Setting a Learning Strategy

24
Suggested Readings

24
Background

WHO IS THIS GUIDEBOOK FOR?

This guidebook is for you if you think you could do a better job learning from job challenges. Perhaps you're a manager who has just been through a tough challenge—overseen a new division in the company or resolved some problems with employees who are holding up production. You may have learned some new things about your own behavior while working out these difficulties, but you sense that you could have learned more and are wondering what can help.

Introduction

Because learning from job experiences is essential for your development as a manager, you should understand three principles of managerial learning:

• You learn the most, in fact it is likely that you only learn, from experiences that are challenging. Some managers uncomfortable with any situation that they are not on top of immediately avoid challenges, thus missing even the opportunity to learn.

• You learn the most if, when facing challenges, you employ a variety of behaviors, or *learning tactics*. Some managers, although perfectly willing to take on challenging experiences, use only comfortable, tried-and-true tactics, thus severely limiting their ability to learn from these experiences.

• You learn the most when you have a strategy that coordinates what you want to learn with the challenges that are likely to teach those lessons, and with the tactics that enable learning.

Increasing the number of learning tactics that you use—becoming a more versatile learner—is therefore a fundamental development task. This guidebook will help you accomplish this, and in doing so it will position you to set a learning strategy that will contribute to your continued managerial development.

The Four Sets of Learning Tactics

There are four sets of learning tactics that managers can use when facing a challenging experience: feeling, action, thinking, and accessing others.

Feeling Tactics

Individuals who use feeling tactics are able to learn because they are able to manage the anxiety and uncertainty that is associated with undertaking new challenges. They can acknowledge the impact of their feelings on what they do, trust what their gut is telling them, and confront themselves when they recognize that their worry is causing them to avoid the challenge.

An example of an effective use of feeling tactics: *Brad, a human resources manager, is now in the middle of his sixth month of managing a large-scale corporate layoff. He has had many ups and downs emotionally because this is a painful project to manage, both for him and for the people who are being let go. This is the first time he has had to oversee a layoff of this scale and at first he panicked, fearful that he couldn't handle the challenge. The task looked enormous to him. But Brad has always been able to access his emotions, and once he acknowledged his anxiety, he was able to accept the task and begin to take small steps that buoyed his confidence. He created outplacement options for released employees and ensured that medical claims would be paid for six months after they left. From these actions he learned about the*

importance of treating the displaced workers fairly. He also felt acutely his own and his staff's pain at having to engineer so much devastation in people's lives. It took a while, but once he confronted these feelings Brad began to set up weekly staff meetings to vent some of the highly charged emotions that abounded, which helped him learn about the importance of communication in times of turmoil.

An example of a situation in which feeling tactics need to be used: *Nicole is a mid-level manager who has just been passed over for promotion. She has been told that it is because she lacks "presence." She knows this means that she does not have much visibility with senior-level decision-makers because she avoids the limelight whenever she might have to make a presentation. In fact, whenever an event calls for public speaking, Nicole avoids it. To get her desired promotion she will have to use feeling tactics. She will have to acknowledge and manage her fear of public speaking so that she can seek the opportunities to practice and get the feedback she needs in order to learn this skill.*

Action Tactics

Individuals who use action tactics learn by doing. They confront a challenge, with their hands on, in real time, and figure it out as they go along.

An example of an effective use of action tactics: *Doris, a manufacturing engineer, is sent from headquarters to turn around a remote manufacturing location that produces hot-water heaters. The biggest problem is that this plant is not meeting its production quotas, and connected with that the morale of the production crews is low, the quality of the product is declining, and there are rumors of the plant*

closing. The first thing that Doris does is get down on the factory floor and observe closely what the actual manufacturing day is like. Doris learns by doing. She quickly sees that the daily quotas, given the material and human resources at hand, are unrealistic. She acts quickly—Doris sees that a critical piece of machinery that could speed up the last few steps in the manufacture of the hot-water heaters is not being used because of an earlier poor budgetary decision. She puts herself on the line, recommending that the multimillion-dollar piece of machinery be ordered at once. She bypasses local management and convinces headquarters brass that the purchase is necessary. Within six months the machinery is up and running. Because of her action-oriented approach Doris learned that sometimes it is critical to take a risk.

An example of a situation in which action tactics need to be used: *Serge has just been promoted to the senior-management team. He comes out of the strategic-planning staff group where he has mastered the work through a meticulous attention to detail. He has never turned in a report or made a presentation where he was not certain that he had exhausted all resources to obtain the facts of the matter. Now that he is on the senior team, he has more management responsibilities and everything is moving much faster. Serge has missed some deadlines and he notices that people are starting to raise their eyebrows whenever he suggests that the group needs more data before it can move forward. For Serge to succeed at this higher level of management, he is going to have to use action tactics. He is going to have to learn on the fly and use his best judgment about how to proceed. The opportunity costs for missed deadlines are too high for the meticulous data-gathering activities of the past.*

Thinking Tactics

Individuals who learn by means of thinking tactics work things out by themselves. They recall the past for similar or contrasting situations. They imagine the future and play out the "What if . . ." in their mind's eye. They gather information from books and reports so that they know the facts.

An example of an effective use of thinking tactics: *Robert, an account manager in a medium-sized advertising firm, has been given the assignment of launching a new promotional campaign for a skin cream that claims to supersede all previous products for maintaining healthy skin in women. He must pull together the correct description of the product from medical experts, run market surveys to determine potential buyers, organize his staff around producing a focused and appealing series of promotional materials, and get buy-in from senior staff to support some risk-taking expenses. Never has he had to manage a project of such importance, and he must do it all within a year. Typically, the first thing that Robert does is daydream. "What would the packaging look like within a stream of creative text? How about if I try that combination of graphic designers and content people working in parallel rather than content first and design later—it worked well on that perfume project. What do the library and the Internet have to provide me with as far as previous experience with skin creams?" Robert does his internal and external research. Though his information gathering and speculation keep a few people waiting, he emerges from the process ready to start his internal lobbying and his external coordination in an informed way. Robert has learned the importance of doing his homework.*

An example of a situation in which thinking tactics need to be used: *Marisa is a product manager in a manufacturing firm. She likes to feel certain of her actions, and so when she is faced with a new challenge she always asks others for advice and support. She then tries to use each person's advice, even when it is contradictory. Eventually, rather than feeling certain and supported, she feels confused and at risk. She is starting to get a reputation as someone unable to stand on her own and think clearly. For Marisa to be an effective learner, she must use thinking tactics. She must be able to master challenging experiences by calling on her own imagination, and she must be able to integrate multiple sources of data and apply them in a coherent way.*

Accessing-others Tactics

Individuals who learn by accessing others like to seek advice, examples, support, or instruction from people who have met a challenge similar to the one they face, or they learn how to do something by watching someone else do it. They may take a formal course or program that is relevant to their situation.

An example of an effective use of accessing-others tactics: *Lee has just been named vice president for operations of an aeronautical company. With unquestioned technical expertise, based on several years in the Air Force and on a solid record of testing new products for the firm, Lee is seen by management as well prepared for the highly technical work around quality processes for airplane parts. Being a part of management means getting involved in such unfamiliar activities as budget meetings, planning a new building, corporate strategizing, and social events with the senior-level management team. Faced with being thrust into this much larger role, and fearing a loss of technical compe-*

tency. Lee asks Kirby, a good friend and someone who had made a similar transition, what to expect. At the same time, Lee begins to observe Cassie, a highly successful manager who has not let managerial duties make her forget what it was like in the trenches. The lessons learned from talking to Kirby and observing Cassie, in addition to some formal leadership-development training, help Lee manage the apprehension and feel comfortable in the new role.

An example of a situation in which accessing-others tactics need to be used: *Grant has just been named a vice president. He is known in the organization for his troubleshooting ability. He can walk into a situation, size it up, and act. In this new role he is responsible for a major organizational-change initiative. It will be critical that people understand why a new system of accountability is being put in place. To learn the best way of doing this he will have to be willing to listen to people's fears and concerns and then patiently explain what the new system will mean to the way they do their work. Grant should identify a few managers who have excellent listening skills and use them as role models. He should also find a peer who will give him frank feedback if he begins to resort to his old "figure it out and move on" approach.*

Finding the Baseline

Most managers employ only one or two of these sets of learning tactics. Let's find out which ones you employ. This will help you understand the ones you need to add in order to increase your versatility as a learner.

What Are Your Preferred Learning Tactics?

Below is a list of statements representing tactics in the four sets of behaviors. Read them over carefully and decide which statements you might make most often. The set with the highest number of statements is your primary one. Be on the lookout for your secondary ones as well.

Feeling Tactics

When I am faced with a challenging opportunity

___ I carefully consider how I feel.
___ I confront myself if I am avoiding the work challenge.
___ I carefully consider how others might feel.
___ I trust my feelings about what to do.
___ I acknowledge the impact of my feelings on what I decide to do.

Action Tactics

When I am faced with a challenging opportunity

___ I figure it out by trial and error.
___ I allow my own experience to be my guide.
___ I immerse myself in the situation to figure it out quickly.
___ I don't allow lack of information or input to keep me from making my move.
___ I commit myself to making something happen.

Thinking Tactics

When I am faced with a challenging opportunity

___ I regularly access magazine articles, books, or the Internet to gain knowledge or information.
___ I ask myself, "How is this similar to other things I know?"

___ I imagine how different options might play out.
___ I try to conceptualize what the ideal person would do.
___ I try to mentally rehearse my actions before entering the situation.

Accessing-others Tactics
When I am faced with a challenging opportunity
___ I often seek the advice of those around me.
___ I look for role models, and I try to emulate the behavior of these people.
___ I find someone who can give me feedback about how I am doing.
___ I look for a course or a training experience.
___ I look for someone who has had experience in that area.

Have you identified your primary set of learning tactics? Your secondary set? Your least-used set? Rank them in order here, 1 to 4, with 1 being the highest. This is not an exhaustive list of all the possible tactics in a set, but it should be enough to give you an idea of how you like to learn. If there are tactics you use and they are not noted above, jot them down and see where they fit.

___ Feeling
___ Action
___ Accessing Others
___ Thinking

Benefits and Problems with Your Preferred Learning Tactics

All of the sets of learning tactics have their advantages and disadvantages. That's why using more than one or two is best for effective learning. Overusing or misusing a set or a tactic can limit effectiveness as a learner. The goal is to become more versatile, so before looking at specific recommendations about how to do that, keep in mind what you identified as your favored set of tactics and take a look at their plusses and minuses below. That will help you see how limiting yourself to only one or two can constrain your learning.

Feeling Tactics

Benefits: You are aware of your own feelings and understand how your feelings about success and failure influence your actions. You consider others' feelings, which makes it more likely that buy-in for work is achieved. You're not afraid to question your own motives when you're avoiding a challenge or to confront yourself on exactly what's bothering you in any particular situation. This keeps you from retreating or from doing what is comfortable instead of what is appropriate.

Overuse or misuse: Some people might perceive you as a "softie" because of your hypersensitivity to feelings. You could be so concerned about how others see you, or how you see the situation, that you might become frozen in indecision.

Action Tactics

Benefits: You do not get bogged down in process or data-gathering and are unlikely to miss deadlines. You can shut out the external din, consider the options quickly, and come to a decision. You experience the problems firsthand because you are in the thick of things.

Overuse or misuse: You may rely too much on action and make decisions without all the necessary information. You may make the same mistake repeatedly. You may be seen as impatient and pushy by others. You may fail because you don't consider the feelings part of the equation.

Thinking Tactics

Benefits: You can imagine yourself being successful, thus enhancing the probability that you will reach your goals. You're also able to analyze situations skillfully, which gives you a leg-up when figuring out next steps. You value being prepared with information and facts. You are good at making comparisons and contrasts.

Overuse or misuse: You may procrastinate, gathering too much information and not putting it to use. You may miss opportunities for learning with others and not receive the benefit of group support. Others may see you as a hermit or even rude and snobbish.

Accessing-others Tactics

Benefits: You take full advantage of the role models in your work environment, learning from their important lessons of experience. Your observational skills are excellent and you use them to discriminate between good managerial behavior and the kind that doesn't succeed. You turn to others for support, feedback, and advice, which keeps you connected to what skills the organization considers important to develop.

Overuse or misuse: You may be reluctant to act. You may also fail to trust yourself and your own judgment and reasoning. If you overdo these tactics, people may feel that they are being used or may think of you as incompetent and unable to cope by yourself.

The following figure should give you a good idea how overdependence on a set of tactics can lead to their misuse.

Illustration of Tactics Overused and Misused

	Without Action	Without Thinking	Without Feeling	Without Accessing Others
ACTION		May not have the vital information. May not extract all the learning from the consequences of action. May repeat actions not successful in the past.	Ignore/deny feelings and slip into habitual responses	Reinventing the wheel, no support, may offend
THINKING	Procrastination		Intellectualize, rationalize to avoid the task	Miss the learnings and support of others. Won't have the benefit of others to push, challenge your thinking.
FEELING	Paralyzed	Overrespond to emotional aspects without the calming influence of reason/past successes		Unnecessary isolation
ACCESSING OTHERS	Talk it to death	Lose the information that resides within formal sources or within one's self. Misuse others to avoid the task.	Misuse others to avoid the task	

Becoming a More Versatile Learner

You have identified your learning preferences and considered the benefits and drawbacks of each. Your task now is to break out of the limitations you may have imposed on yourself as a learner and begin to expand your learning tactics.

Get Out of Your Comfort Zone

The learning tactics that you use in your everyday business life are an ingrained part of your behavior. When you attempt to step outside of this preferred behavior set you may experience unease, and that unease can send you scurrying right back to your comfort zone. Your head and your gut will send you strong signals. "What do you mean ask someone for advice! They'll think I'm stupid." "What do you mean just do it! What if someone asks a question I can't answer?"

If you are to change your behaviors and become a better learner, you need to control your anxiety and calm the voices that are urging you to return to what is known, familiar, comfortable, and successful (but narrow) for you. The learning tactics can also help here. Here are some strategies for overcoming anxiety, using tactics from each set.

Recognize that you are uncomfortable and would rather not face this challenge. This is a feelings tactic. Another feelings tactic to help you explore what is behind the discomfort might be writing in a learning journal or taking a long and reflective walk. Explore what

it means to you to fail or be imperfect. You may have unrealistic expectations of what you need to do or what you need to accomplish. You may imagine that others judge you as harshly as you judge yourself. Place a value on what you want to learn. Decide what you are more afraid of—looking foolish while you are learning or never learning the skill at all. It is very likely that the fear that is holding you back is an unrealistic fear.

Some thinking tactics that will help you get out of your comfort zone include activities like mental rehearsal—imagine yourself doing the task well. Develop a clear mental picture of what you are wearing, where you are standing, what you are saying. This blots out the pictures of failure, and it is impossible to hold both success and failure images in your mind at the same time. When the negative image pops up, replace it at once with the positive image. On the other hand, thinking tactics will not help you get out of your comfort zone if you are only using them because you don't like asking others for advice or support.

Accessing-others tactics to move you out of your comfort zone include finding friends or colleagues to talk to. They might be able to serve as role models for you and help you do a better job of creating the picture of success in your mind. They might also be willing to provide a venue for you to practice the new behaviors. An accessing-others tactic is not appropriate if you are only using it because you are afraid to stand alone.

An action tactic for getting out of the comfort zone might be making a public commitment to accomplish the task or rewarding yourself for action. Action tactics are not appropriate if you are choosing them because you cannot stand to be still with the silence of your own thoughts.

Expand Your Learning Tactics

Use the list below to help you start using other learning tactics. Refer to the checklist you completed earlier and find the set that you use the least. Then pick one or two tasks from that set that you can live with—that don't make you too uncomfortable.

Feeling Tactics

- Recall the times that you have been successful in learning something new, even though you were uneasy. What did you do?
- Recall the times you missed an opportunity to learn something because you were too anxious about it. What did you miss learning?
- Pay attention to how you feel when you see someone else trying to learn something new.
- Keep a journal when you are embarking on a learning task and note if your feelings are interfering with the learning.

Action Tactics

- Teach someone else a skill.
- "Go with your gut" instead of relying on the opinions of others.
- Commit yourself to making something happen, today.
- Take on a project with a tight deadline.

Accessing-others Tactics

- Find someone who will give you feedback on a problem area in your life.
- Pick a role model for a particular skill that you value and interview or observe that person.

- Meet with others who have faced similar situations.
- Ask lots of questions.
- Attend a training course for a particular skill area.
- Seek a mentor or tutor.
- Don't assume that your idea is the best one—get input from others.
- Listen.

Thinking Tactics

- Look for patterns in similar situations. Ask yourself, "Where have I encountered this before?"
- Keep a learning journal to track your progress on a new skill.
- Imagine what a situation will look like in the future.
- Access a book, a video, a magazine article, or the Internet to find answers and information on a particular problem.
- Mentally rehearse your actions before a new situation.
- Ask yourself, "What lessons have I learned this week?" Write them down.

Conclusion: Setting a Learning Strategy

By familiarizing yourself with the four sets of learning tactics that managers commonly employ, by identifying the sets that you prefer and those you avoid, and by consciously making an effort to use nonpreferred tactics, you will increase your versatility as a learner. This should contribute to your performance as a manager.

It will also position you for another important development task: setting a learning strategy. A learning strategy coordinates your efforts to become a more versatile learner with your development goals. In order to create one you must: (1) identify what you want to learn (which can be determined by looking at such things as feedback provided by a performance appraisal or by a 360-degree instrument); (2) choose challenging experiences that will teach you what you want to learn (information about which lessons are typically taught by which managerial experiences can be found in various publications; see, for instance, *The Lessons of Experience* (McCall and others) in the list of suggested readings at the end of this guidebook); and (3) map the sequence of learning tactics required to meet each challenge.

Such a strategy will ensure that you will continue to develop your versatility because, although you will have already used many of the tactics called for in the sequence, it will require you to use additional ones. It will also ensure that you will have what we at CCL consider a crucial element in managerial development—a steady stream of challenging experiences.

Suggested Readings

Bunker, K. A., & Webb, A. D. (1992). *Learning how to learn from experience: Impact of stress and coping.* Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

Dixon, N. (1994). *The organizational learning cycle: How we can learn collectively.* London: McGraw-Hill.

Gibbons, M. (1990). A working model of the learning-how-to-learn process. In R. M. Smith and Associates, *Learning to learn across the life span.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

McCall, M. W., Jr., Lombardo, M. M., & Morrison, A. M. (1988). *The lessons of experience: How successful executives develop on the job.* Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

McCauley, C. D., Ruderman, M., Ohlott, P., & Morrow, J. (1994). Assessing the developmental components of managerial jobs. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 79*(4), 544-560.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Background

The hypotheses that form this guidebook are two. The first is that individuals who use a greater variety of tactics will be better learners. Maxine Dalton and Silvia Swigert found that individuals who report using all of the tactics more than the average are also more

likely to report engaging in challenging opportunities and seeking and using feedback. The second hypothesis is that individuals who are better learners will become better managers. This hypothesis is under investigation and there is ample qualitative evidence to support it, for example, the work by McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison that resulted in the book, *The Lessons of Experience* (Lexington Books, 1988).

The tactics themselves represent the work of a number of learning theorists, for example, action learning (Reg Revans), cognitive rehearsal (Donald Meichenbaum), social learning and learning from direct experience (Albert Bandura). The work on the feeling tactics was informed by the neoanalytic work of Karen Horney.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Horney, K. (1970). *Neurosis and human growth.* New York: Norton.

Meichenbaum, D. (1977). *Cognitive behavior modification.* New York: Plenum.

Revans, R. W. (1980). *Action learning.* London: Blond and Briggs.

The work on learning management skills from challenging assignments comes from research conducted at CCL by Cindy McCauley, Marian Ruderman, Patty Ohlott, and Jane Morrow. The work on the importance of learning from a variety of tactics and the importance of paying attention to how you learn was first conducted at CCL by Michael Lombardo, Kerry Bunker, and Amy Webb.

Some of the exercises have been used in CCL's Leadership Development Program (LDP)™ and were developed by trainers in these programs.

Other Guidebooks

Ongoing Feedback: How to Get it, How to Use It

Formal feedback experiences—such as a management development program, performance review, or assessment by means of a 360-degree instrument—and career transitions both involve acquiring new skills and honing current ones. Critical to this is measuring progress. This guidebook provides a proven technique on how to get and use the feedback that will help. Tips on how to evaluate the feedback and what to do if the decision is made not to use it are also provided.

Reaching Your Development Goals

After a formal feedback experience, individuals are often enthusiastic about pursuing their development goals but then hesitate because they don't know where to begin. This guidebook shows three strategies that are necessary in any intentional effort to grow: seek challenging assignments, seek training for targeted skills, and seek developmental relationships. Practical advice is given on how to choose the right assignments, identify specific skills that need improving, and establish relationships that will provide ongoing support and encouragement.

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